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THE GOOD WILL OF THE CONSUMER¹

MR. D. R. GWINN:² In our city we have tried to get the good will of the people by newspaper advertisements from time to time, by letting the public know what we are doing, by giving them the facts about the business and by telling them things that ordinarily a company would not confide to the public. Perhaps this plan helps in in two ways, for, in giving out the information the newspaper man feels a little more kindly towards the company, he has a little more softening of the heart than he would have if there were nothing coming over the counter. Our method of giving the facts to the public is to buy advertising space. I think it is a great mistake for anybody to think he can buy a paid article, booming or boosting a water company. You should do as the drygoods man does, buy space and write up the advertisement, and not depend on the newspaper man to do it for you. He does not know your game, you know it better than anyone else. Put your statement in such simple language that the public may read as it runs, use good sized type and plenty of space, a quarter or half a page. One time we had something particular to present to the public and we used two pages. It costs money, but it brings a return.

First of all, of course, it is necessary to furnish good water and good service. Do not think for a minute that you can get good publicity unless you are furnishing first class service. The public is entitled to first class service and it is a good thing, when you are furnishing it, to tell the people about it once in a while, so that they will take pride in the water supply of the city. That helps a whole lot. After you have gotten the good water and good service, then there is the office counter. You may counteract good publicity in a few minutes at the counter, by having someone there who is not considerate of the public. We have a sign in our office which reads something like this. "Courteous conduct towards patrons and the general public is a part of Terre Haute Water Service."

¹Discussion at the Cleveland Convention, June 10, 1921.

²President, Water Company, Terre Haute, Indiana.

Another thing I am trying to impress on the minds of the clerks is that I am not paying their salaries. It is the people who are bringing in \$1.00 or \$1.25 and handing it over the counter. Be considerate of the customers. We are on the meter basis. If we find, when the readings come in, that the consumption of any particular consumer is larger than usual, we send a postal to the customer immediately and suggest that we would be glad to help him by making an inspection of his service if he so desires, and that there is no charge for service of this kind. If the consumer wants a second reading of his meter, we read it for him. We have a postal card to fill in letting him know whether the reading is correct or not. The customer will say, "Well, that water company up there is not interested in running our bills up so high and they are willing to let us know in advance of the time of delivering the bill just about how high the consumption is."

Then there is another way—getting the public down to visit the plant. We put in a tennis court and it is available to the public. They may call up the day before and register whatever hour they want to play. We maintain the court, and those who play there say it is the best in the city. When they have tournaments the finals are played on the water works court, because it is such a good court. We had a landscape gardener come and draw plans for our grounds and we have a very nice park. We invite the public to come and bring their picnic suppers and eat at our park. I recently sent out about four hundred letters, with a blue print showing the typhoid rate in Terre Haute for the last eleven years, with a note on it to the effect that as the water consumers increase, the typhoid death rate decreases. The two curves are gradually coming together. In our letter we suggest that they are interested in all the good things in Terre Haute, and so we are sending this letter to them, and suggest that when they have visitors coming to the city, to tell them about Terre Haute's good water service. We sent these out to physicians, city officials, educators and prominent people, people who make public opinion, members of the chamber of commerce, the Rotary Club, the Greater Terre Haute Club and organizations of that kind. Last year we had the Rotary Club down to our plant, for a picnic luncheon. It gave them an opportunity to see the plant, and it also gave us a chance to say a few words about the character of the service we are furnishing. We have also had the Manufacturers' Club and the school children, and the school children are mighty good

advertisers. We get our young lady chemist to take the little girls around and show them how we make the water good. They go back then and write articles on the subject to educate father and mother, and all that helps business. You have got to be after the thing all the time to develop good publicity along the right lines.

MR. F. C. AMSBARY:³ The purpose of our publicity campaign is not to increase our business, as it is in Mr. Gwinn's town. He told me that they had about 4600 houses on their distribution system that were not taking water, so he combined his articles for the purpose of getting good will and to sell more water. With us, our water supply is limited, and it has been our problem to get all the water we can sell. We can sell more than we are getting. I think we have the good will of the community as much as the average plant. But reading Mr. Gwinn's articles inspired me to do something along that line. We started about three or four months ago, and every week we publish, in each of the daily papers, an article on the water supply. We started out with an article headed "We Want Your Good Will." I wish I had brought it along so that I could read it to you, but it took up perhaps thirty inches of space. It was display advertising to catch the eye. We told the people that we believed if they knew more about the water works and our problems, if they knew how much money we were taking in, how much we were spending and from what source we derived our revenue and how we spent it, they would know how much we were making. If they knew more about the problems of the water supply, and its distribution and purification, that we would have their good will in a larger measure than ever before.

The next article published was a cash statement showing our revenue, how much we received from private consumers and how much from the city hydrant rental; and then we showed the expenditures. This was not a statement in much detail, but enough so that the large items were mentioned, as taxes, wages, labor, fuel, power, and it showed the revenue. We have been following that up each week with descriptions of the plant, and we always urge the people to visit the plant. I had signs painted in conspicuous letters, which read, "Visitors Welcome." I put those around on different buildings, the filter house and pumping station, and we are getting more people out to the pumping station. It is remarkable how few people visit

³Manager, Water Company, Champaign, Illinois.

the pumping station in our town, and I expect that applies to every city. We believe that this is going to establish us better in the community. I just heard mention of the school children. We have been having classes come there during the school year about every Saturday. We have been urging them to visit the plant through the superintendent of schools. Classes of from 20 to 40 come out and we take great pains in showing them around and explaining the process of pumping and purification. I am planning now to offer next fall a series of prizes for the best written essays on the water system of our city, to be decided by a disinterested committee.

MR. W. H. HARRISON:⁴ We, not unlike the large majority of other water-works operators, are very much troubled for the fair and correct answer to claims for refunds upon large water bills. We are fully aware of the incompetency of many, and of the carelessness of more, of our public plumbers, and have tried to remedy, or at least to alleviate, the "troubles" incident thereto, by licensing and ordinance control; all of which has proven more or less ineffectual.

A large water bill accrues during the month. We immediately notify the consumer of an apparently excessive (over his general average) use of water, suggesting that he have his private plumbing looked after. The plumber is called. He repairs a small or large leak, reports everything alright to the owner, and takes his leave—(leaving, in all probability, a much worse leak behind him). The owner or consumer, assumes that his plumbing is alright and is comfortable, until shocked the following month by an even larger bill. Then the trouble commences. The consumer comes with claims for refunds, fully persuaded that his plumbing is alright, no leaks anywhere, "knows" he has not used the water, and insists that the meter is wrong, or not read, demands inspection and tests of meters, and is rarely satisfied, with all of the trouble, expense and time taken and expended by the Department, in fruitless effort towards this end.

We have printed forms for the submission of claims for refunds. One must be filled out by the owner, or consumer, and the other by the plumber making repairs.

About six or eight months ago, we added one more question to the plumbers' statement or questionnaire: "Was the meter still when you completed your work?" It has proven a "life saver," for both

⁴General Superintendent, Memphis Artesian Water Department, Memphis, Tennessee.

the Department and consumer, as it compels the plumber, after what he thinks is the completion of his work, to shut off all openings, go back and examine the meter and see if it is "still."

It was this apparently small matter that I desired to bring to the attention of the Superintendents, for what it might be worth to any who might have similar troubles of their own.